

the days of the open hand by IssyLily

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Summary:

After everything they had been through, the only certainty in Joyce Byer's life was that Jim Hopper would always pick up the phone when she called.

Until the night he didn't.

the days of the open hand

Hopper always picked up the phone.

Six months had passed since Joyce had been forced to push her boy to the point of conscious cremation, since she had watched a kind, kind man ripped to bloody shreds in front of her, since the nightmare that had plagued her dreams returned to her reality. But they were also six months since that evil had been defeated. Since then – amongst the nights spent screaming grief into her pillow, biting down on her fist to stop herself from waking the kids – she had embraced routine, preferring boredom over danger. It was easier to wake up at the same time, work the same shifts (sometimes doubles if need be), eat dinner as the sun set, and be in bed just as the dark crept in. She needed to be asleep before it was pitch black. So did Will.

Hopper had become a strange part of the routine as well though, something that had not been a possibility before, even after they ventured into the Upside Down together back in '83. He picked up Will from school on Mondays and Thursdays when Joyce had to cover the afternoons at Melvald's, he came for dinner on Sundays, and he even helped Jonathan with his college applications afterwards although Joyce knew any dream he had had of college had been crushed by the drafts for Vietnam. Hopper had transformed from the reckless, arrogant, angry teenager she had once known – and still recognised when he had returned to Hawkins twenty years on, with the additional characteristics of sex and alcohol dependency – into a pillar of stability, comfort, *warmth*. He still drank, still smoked like an ex-trooper, and still swore like the world was ending (although she knew he had left the sleeping around in the past, something that brought a surprising contentment to her when she considered it late at night), but he had changed. He was responsible for El, a father reborn. She often caught him smiling – a loud, euphoric smile – like it wasn't a secret anymore that sometimes, just *sometimes*, he could be happy.

And he always, always, picked up the phone.

Except this time he hadn't, and Will was screaming in his bed.

“Will honey, look at me!” Joyce shouted, her ears ringing from the pitch of his screaming, her hands clasped around his clammy cheeks, wiping away tears that were streaming from eyes shut tight in terror. Jonathan was stood in the corridor, trapped in a vicious cycle: frantically dialling Hopper’s number (digits the whole family had learned off by heart, just in case), getting through to his machine, slamming the phone down on the receiver, and trying again. Eight attempts in, he gave up.

“He won’t pick up mom, I don’t know what to do!” Jonathan said over the hideous wails of his baby brother, who he could see writhing in his mom’s arms. She turned to look at him, desperation painted across her face in primary colours. Joyce shook her head in hopeless abandonment, and turned back to Will.

“Will!” Joyce shouted again, feeling her jaw strain as she tried not to cry, “Will, baby, wake up! You’re safe, you’re safe, I’m here. I promised I’d never let anything hurt you, and I won’t! I won’t!” She drew him in, goosebumps sprouting on her arms as they came into contact with the cold sweat streaming from her boy. Jonathan knelt down by her feet by the side of Will’s bed, and grasped Will’s free hand. *Oh God, please no*, Joyce begged to herself, *not again, please not again*.

After a few minutes, Will’s piercing screams began to subside, and within a few protracted seconds, his eyes rolled back and focused on his mom’s face. Confusion was the first feeling, followed swiftly by horror as he sharply glanced out of his bedroom window, scanning and searching for the prey that had hunted him in his sleep.

“Sweetheart you’re okay, you’re okay,” Joyce whispered, clutching Will into her arms and squeezing him as tight as she knew she could. He put his trembling arms around her waist and squeezed back, crying into the front of her shirt in both exhaustion and relief.

“He got me again mom, he was right here,” Will sobbed, and Jonathan clambered onto his bed and hugged him tight, trying to allay the idea in Will’s head that that...*thing* would ever get past him and his mom. He didn’t care if it was omnipotent, alien, evil, it would never break through the Byers again. They were too strong now. “He told me I belonged to him, that he was going to...” Will began again,

but he was broken off by a new wave of tears, too disturbed by his sleep to notice the same in his mother's eyes.

The three of them stayed there, two silent protectors watching over their ward, until Will's sobs became snores. Jonathan hopped off the bed, and Joyce laid her youngest back onto the middle of his mattress, drawing his duvet over his pale, skinny form. She made a note to start buying more meat from the Kings. Will had always been naturally slender, but at the moment he looked emaciated, corpse-like, and she had seen him in this state too many times to ever be able to forgive herself for it. Jonathan seemed to know what she was thinking, because after she pressed a hundred tender kisses to Will's forehead, he dragged her out of the room, and said, "You *cannot* be blaming yourself for this."

Joyce waved a hand towards Will, shattered, and replied, "How can I not? I'm his mom, I'm supposed to look after him! I can't even protect him from nightmares, how can I promise to protect him from anything else?"

Jonathan almost laughed, and Joyce gave him a pointed stare, pleading with him to tell her what could possibly be amusing.

"Mom, you're beating yourself up because you couldn't stop a monster from taking him. Other moms beat themselves up because they were late for car-pool, or because their kids turn out to be assholes," Jonathan said, gripping Joyce by the shoulders, trying to make her see reason, "You couldn't stop it taking him. But you didn't stop until you got him back. That's what matters."

Joyce nodded, locked in eye contact, and wondered where Jonathan had gotten so perceptive. It certainly wasn't a quality he had inherited from Lonnie, who could barely perceive that he was supposed to pay child support for his own children, and she doubted it was her. Jonathan was such a good, brave boy. Even without his words, he was proof enough that she had done a good job as a mother. That she had tried her best.

"You're right," she exhaled, bowing her head and staring at the floor, "You're right, I'm sorry."

“Mom don’t apologise,” Jonathan replied, guilt in his words, as if he felt like he had berated her into submission, “Mom, just...just make yourself a cup of tea, I’ll look over Will while you rest for a bit.”

Will hadn’t had an episode for months. Occasionally she would hear him mumbling through the walls, moaning in his sleep as he relived some of the trauma he had been forced through, but they were dreams, images of the past that would haunt a grown man, let alone a little boy. And sometimes at the breakfast table, his expression would wander off without the rest of him, and he wouldn’t hear her questions to respond to them, and he would spend the day in a daze. But he had his friends to bring him back to the present, to pull him out from his reverie, and his family to guard him at night. Will had been through something Joyce thought was probably worse than Hell, but he had been recovering well. Slowly, but well.

And now this had pushed them back to the very beginning.

She boiled a pan of water on the hob – the kettle had been on its last legs for weeks now – and pulled a mug from one of the cupboards. As the water started to bubble and hiss, Joyce realised with a start that she had started to prepare tea for two.

Because Hopper was supposed to be here.

“Jonathan?” Joyce called quietly into the hallway, and he shuffled into the kitchen, unwilling to take his eyes off of Will for more than a fraction of a second, “What happened with Hopper? Why couldn’t you get through?”

“I don’t know,” Jonathan admitted, distrust in his expression. He liked Hopper, had accepted that the man had an unspecified role in this family that went beyond the presence that Bob Newby had maintained before...before he was gone, but this was a betrayal in his eyes. Hopper failing to show at the time when he was needed the most. “It just rang through like ten times, he just wouldn’t pick up. Line wasn’t disconnected or anything.”

Instead of feeling her resolve harden at the revelation, Joyce’s hands began to shake, and the bolt of fear she had felt upon hearing Will’s screams struck her stomach once again.

Something had to have happened. She knew Eleven was at her mother's house for the weekend – the young girl having forgiven her aunt for telling someone else she had been there before – and Hopper was alone in that cabin in the woods. As far as she knew, Hawkin's Lab had been closed down indefinitely, but he wouldn't be too hard to find if someone wanted to find him. And if Will had been revisited tonight by the spectre of his past, then maybe something had caught onto Hopper's scent as well. Joyce was suddenly sick with fear, unable to hear what Jonathan was saying to her.

"I've got to go," she said suddenly, and Jonathan's eyes widened at her.

"You can't leave mom, it's gone eleven, and Will..." he pleaded as Joyce threw a coat on over her shabby pyjamas – or rather, the old Rolling Stones t-shirt and patched pants that acted as pyjamas – and shoved her feet into some boots by the front door, scooping her car keys from the kitchen counter.

She turned to Jonathan, breathing in deeply to calm her nerves. "As long as you stay here, Will is okay, he's safe. I know you'll look after him, you're the best big brother any boy could hope for," Joyce said softly, kissing Jonathan's cheek, "but I have to check on Hopper. Something's *wrong*."

Straining with disapproval and worry, but ultimately accepting that his mother's logic was sound, Jonathan nodded his head, and Joyce ran out of the front door towards the car.

The drive was long, unpleasant, and spooky. It was nearing summer, but at this time, when the sun was long forgotten and the moon reigned in the sky, it was too reminiscent of times gone by for Joyce to ever feel comfortable being alone. As a child, a teenager, even a grown adult, she had preferred her own company, or that of her and her boys away from the rest of the world who so often seemed to wish them harm. That's why she insisted on living just on the periphery of town, to give herself a bit of sanctuary, a place where she wasn't surrounded by neighbours cooing over her, constantly asking her how she was, if she needed anything, and wasn't the weather lovely today. It had always been provoked by a combination of her anxiety and her deep-seated need for quiet, but after all that

had happened, she was starting to regret removing herself from other people's lives. Dropping off Will at the Wheelers, she nowadays found herself accepting Karen's invitation to stay for a drink. She chose to join the rest of the staff on evenings out, on the odd occasion here or there that there was a birthday, an anniversary.

But the person she found most solace in was Hopper. Someone had spun her a line a while back about shared trauma, and whilst sometimes she still longed for Bob, for that little piece of normality that he had offered through his ignorance, she never had to hold Hopper at arm's length like she did him. Poor Bob, gentle Bob, sweet, kind, and dead-because-of-her Bob. Joyce swerved suddenly in the road at that thought, and took a deep breath through her nose. She heard Hopper's voice in her head – *he loved you Joyce, that's not your fault. He loved you, and he wanted to protect you. You can't blame yourself for that.* It was a reminder she needed recorded onto tape so she could play it to herself constantly.

Hopper had become her rock. On the good days, when she could almost pretend it was two years ago, and the strangest thing about her family was that she was a single parent, she laughed remembering how they had been as teenagers: always sparring, with words, and then in other more enjoyable ways, always laughing, always planning to get away from Hawkins and be something *more*. It didn't seem like a pipe dream at the time, and she could remember how it felt to smoke cigarettes with him in bed, squirrelled away in the alcove of her parents' attic conversion where they couldn't hear them. Could remember him biting down on her bottom lip, his right hand trailing down the then-taut skin of her stomach, the weight of his arm across her waist as they slept. And she could remember long lost conversations sprinkled with words they would never say to one another again.

Joyce parked the car on the edge of the forest, next to Hopper's police truck, and without much of a plan, went running between the trees, desperately hoping that muscle memory would guide her to Hopper's cabin. She hadn't been there since Will's...God, it had been almost an *exorcism*...but Joyce was sure she would manage to find it. As she delved deeper into the woods, as the night surrounded her, her heart rate began to spike, panic rising up like bile in her throat,

and she swallowed thickly.

She never had to worry about Hopper. Maybe it was his size and stature, his gruff nature, his unshakeable resolve, but he seemed permanent. Like nothing could touch him. Even finding him nearly dead in the Upside Down couldn't alter her image of him as someone who would *always* be there. He wasn't always in the best shape – she could remember in vivid detail their brief reencounter when he returned to Hawkins in '79, and the absolute state he had been in – but he was always there. Like he was cast out of iron.

She could see lights in the distance, and Joyce ran towards it as though Death was chasing her once more. She reached the cabin just as the noises of the forest began to frighten her, and she slammed her fist on the wooden door with such vigour that she could've put her hand straight through it.

Hopper swung the door open a few seconds later, and stared at Joyce as if she were a ghost.

“Joyce, it's nearly midnight, what the hell are you doing here?” he asked, not unkindly, but like he was examining her mental state. Stepping aside to allow her into the cabin, Joyce looked around for signs of danger, signs that Hopper was under some kind of duress.

She came up with nothing.

“I...I was worried,” Joyce stuttered as Hopper slunk back over to the sofa and dropped back into the seat, not looking at her directly, like she was a videotape on pause in the background, “Jonathan called, Will had an episode, but he couldn't get through, but the phone was ringing, but you weren't picking up, so I thought I better check, but now...”

“Is Will okay?” Hopper interrupted, finally a little animated, and Joyce nodded. Hopper nodded back, apparently content with her answer, but made no move to say anything in response.

“So are *you* okay?” Joyce pushed, and Hopper leaned forward so he was sitting with his hands clasped together under his chin.

"m fine Joyce, you didn't need to come all the way out here," Hopper replied, exasperation in his tone like she was a mosquito he just couldn't be bothered to reach out and squash. He picked up a half-drunk bottle of beer from beside his foot and took a swig, and Joyce saw red.

"Are you fucking kidding me Hopper?" she shouted, and Hopper looked startled, and the tiniest bit amused at the sight of a woman half his size standing over him, foul language spewing from her mouth, before his expression turned hard. "Are you kidding! Will was screaming like he was being tortured, like that- like that *thing* had come back for him again and he was terrified, and so was I! So was I Hopper! And I needed you, and where were you? Sat here listening to the phone ring!"

"Joyce, I-" Hopper started, standing up in what Joyce assumed was a power move intended to make her stand down. But she wasn't about to be intimidated by this man, this man who had made her sick with worry but had in reality just. *Let. Her. Down.*

"I don't want your half-assed apologies Hop!" Joyce retorted, but before she could get any further, he took a step towards her, so close she could reach out a hand to touch his face, and said gently, "I wasn't about to offer you an apology Joyce."

Never mind the delivery; every word was barbed, stinging, and Joyce recoiled from him, horrified by his calloused response. She moved towards the door, anger boiling up inside of her, growing so rapidly she knew she would burst soon if she didn't get away from him, but Hopper reached the door before she did and slammed it closed, preventing her from leaving.

"Please calm down for a minute Joyce," he started, but was not permitted to finish.

"What if it had been an emergency Hop? What if it had been really bad? Or are you just bored of it now, bored of my family and my damage?" Joyce accused, feeling horrible for even daring to give her voice to such petty, childish doubts, but so enraged by his lack of interest that she didn't care how much she hurt him right now.

He looked at her like he was a deer she had just shot in the belly. Pain didn't flash across his face – it spread slowly, like a virus, until it encompassed every inch and his blue eyes stared at her, his mouth open like he couldn't believe she had just uttered those words. Joyce had a very small capacity for guilt – oh self-hatred she could manage in buckets, but it was rare she had enough of a relationship with someone else to have to consider their feelings – but right now it hit her like a truck, and she reached for Hopper's hand which was hanging by his side.

Something *was* wrong. Just not in the way that she had thought.

Joyce was halfway to asking for an explanation when Hopper abandoned all pretences, and dropped his head onto her shoulder, wrapping his long, strong arms around her tiny waist. He didn't cry audibly, but she could feel tears seeping through her pyjama top, and his whole body shook, which felt like an earthquake in comparison to how Will had moved earlier. Joyce stood in shock for a moment before instinct kicked in, and she cradled Jim's head in her hands, kissing his forehead, and rocking him from side to side. Something in her snapped, and she began to cry as well, infected by the sadness that had taken hostage of her best friend.

Well, her only friend.

Slowly, Joyce guided them to the battered sofa, and climbed into Hopper's lap so she could still keep her arms around his shoulders, and hold him close to her. His breathing was irregular, juddery, in her ear, and she murmured softly as he continued to weep into her shoulder. A small part of her wanted to turn around and say, *hey you, I'm the one that cries and you're the one who keeps it together, what's going on*, but then Joyce remembered that whilst she had gone through a living nightmare these past few years, at least her boy was safe in bed at home.

Sara. *Shit.*

"Oh Hop, I'm so sorry I forgot it was today, I'm *so sorry*," Joyce whispered in his ear, tears streaming down her cheeks in sympathy, hurt, and embarrassment. Hopper said nothing in response, but slowly, his heartbeat slowed against her chest, and his eyes dried

against her shoulder.

He raised his head to look at her, and she shifted in his lap so she could make eye contact, tentatively placing her left hand on his cheek, brushing his beard with her thumb.

“I’m sorry for not answering Joyce, I am, I know it could’ve been serious,” he murmured, but Joyce shook her head, tears springing free as she did so.

“Shut up Hop, you...you don’t have to explain anything...it’s...” Joyce struggled for the words as he continued to search her face for the answer to a question he hadn’t asked, “I’m so sorry.” She settled with an apology that she hoped could overwrite the hurt she had inflicted, and pressed a gentle kiss just underneath his right eye. In return, Hopper shook his head, forgiving her with just a gesture, and placed a hand around her waist to keep her fixed in place.

Joyce rested her head on his shoulder for a little while as the silence consumed the world around them. Even though it was nearly summer, the atmosphere deep within these woods reminded her of driving down the highway in deep fog, when you couldn’t see a thing on either side of you, and it was like you could just fall off of the edge of the world.

And for an indeterminable amount of time, it almost felt like they had. This was uncharted territory, the two of them clinging to one another like they were hoping the other could stop them from drowning, or, at the very least, provide them with some comfort whilst they sank into the deep, bleak blue.

But neither of them could afford to sink. They had responsibilities, people who depended on them, people that they had to go home to.

“Do you think,” Hopper said, breaking the tranquil illusion of their little space away from the rest of the world, “that we’ll ever feel normal again? That this will ever just stop?”

That what has happened in the past will ever not hurt?

Joyce spent so much time seeing Hopper as the shoulder to cry and

rely on that sometimes she forgot how much he had suffered. He carried the weight of so much, and still had the strength to carry her too, that Joyce had blindly allowed her own concerns, her own worries to swallow her whole. For the past few months, she and Hop had been slowly becoming a team, but that meant sharing the burden. He had never been particularly candid about how he felt, about how much he was hurting *all the goddamn time* from horrors she both knew and would never know, and she had allowed it to fester within him. She was too old, too wise, and too honest to tell him that either of them could ever recover from what had happened to them.

But there was always hope.

"I don't think it's possible for us to be normal anymore," Joyce said quietly, taking note of the fact that she had absentmindedly been brushing circles into Hopper's head with her fingertips, "not after what we've seen, where we've been. But at least...we saw it together, we went there together."

Hopper looked at her questioningly, and Joyce found herself unable to tear herself away from his gaze. He had always had an intense look about him, something that made it nigh on impossible to find yourself unenchanted by him, but right now it was imbued with such, just...Joyce had to call it *love*, that it scared her. But that fear didn't have time to stop the connection between her brain and her mouth.

"You're never alone Hop. You're never going to be alone again," she said breathlessly, and closed her eyes as Jim moved in to kiss her.

It was a culmination of days and weeks and months and years of suppressed affection, chemistry, *longing*. It was the natural stopping point for two people who the world had churned up, broken, bent, misshaped, damaged, and almost ruined before repair. Two people who had suffered broken hearts a thousand times apiece; a man who had suffered war, the loss of his only child, the condemnation and mockery of a town who called him cheap and refused to see anything more, and a woman who had had her dreams shattered, had watched herself fall into poverty and isolation, who had been forced to traverse universes to rescue her stolen child. He was her best friend, and beyond that, the only person who could possibly comprehend

why some days she could barely get out of bed.

But he was also someone that Joyce was undeniably attracted to. Before they had seen themselves decimated by outside forces, they had tried to forge a path together. Maybe it was fate that they found themselves here again.

Hop moved against her mouth like he had when he was seventeen, and Joyce couldn't help but emit a small moan as he slipped his hand further down her back onto her ass. But for all the memories of their ravenous sexual appetites from years ago, she didn't feel the desire to rip his shirt apart and let him fuck her as hard as he could – as hard as she *knew* he could. In this moment, they were both too melancholic, too worn down for that. So he kissed her with an aching tenderness, and with such reverent adoration that Joyce felt like she had swallowed the sun.

Joyce was the first to speak.

“How old would she have been?” she asked tentatively, her breath still entangled with Hopper's, warmth flooding her entire body.

Jim seemed to stiffen initially at the enquiry, but smiled to himself and said, “Eleven by now.”

He took a deep breath. Joyce knew that he never talked about Sara. With anyone.

“Still can't get my head around it sometimes,” he carried on unexpectedly, and Joyce nestled closer into him, resting her head on his chest, tucking herself under his chin. She had never felt safer in her life than she did right now, with him. “Spent so long when Sara was a baby wondering what she would be like as a teenager, how I would beat up any boys who came looking for her, her first prom, first car, first job, what it would be like to walk her down the aisle...”

His voice faltered a little, and Joyce pressed her lips to the bit of collar bone she had access to, like it was the most natural thing, like it was something they had been doing for years.

“I lost that, all of it. And now I've got it back, but with someone so

completely different,” Hopper said, almost in awe, “I mean, I don’t have to do the whole mean-dad thing for a kid who can make a guy bleed from his eyes do I?”

Joyce laughed a little at that, and Hopper’s whole face lit up at the sight of her smile. “I think you can still do the good-cop, bad-cop routine, even if she does have superpowers,” Joyce replied fairly, and Hop chuckled into her hair.

“Who’d thought we’d ever end up here?” he asked suddenly in a small voice, and Joyce retreated from her hiding place under his chin and kissed him.

She smiled, and answered, “It’s not such a bad place to be.”

He considered her for a moment, and seemed to agree with her conclusion.

“You’re a great dad Hop,” Joyce assured him, knowing him well enough to know his doubts, his fears about who he wanted to be.

“I’m trying,” Hop replied, staring at her, and then he broke into one of the biggest smiles she had ever seen him wear. He ran a finger along the sleeve of her pyjama top and asked, “Is this my Rolling Stones t-shirt? The one I bought when we went to see them back in ’64, before I went to ‘Nam?”

Joyce shook her head unconvincingly, and let out a squeal when Hopper grabbed her around the waist and laid her down on the sofa to get a proper look.

“That definitely is, Joyce, you’ve never needed a t-shirt that big in your life, not even when you were pregnant,” he said accusingly, and the sheer joy in her expression somehow made every fucking thing in his life seem okay, just for a few moments. Before she had time to respond, he said, “I can’t believe you kept that thing for over twenty years.”

“Could never stand to throw anything out,” Joyce said cheekily, running her hand up Jim’s arm, almost evaluating the shape of him – like either of them hadn’t realised Joyce indeed took a good look

every now and then (although Hopper would be lying if he said he didn't do the same, even if he happened to be rather more stealthy about it).

"Apart from your shit of an ex-husband," Hopper said, and Joyce nodded her head as if to say, *fair enough*.

They moved apart for the first time that evening, and Joyce caught a glimpse of her watch.

"Shit, I should be getting home Jim," she said, and Hopper was caught off-guard by her use of his Christian name. He had been Hop for the five years since he had returned to Hawkins, although admittedly, this evening had been a step towards something entirely different.

It was nearly half one; Jonathan would be wondering where she was, and she had to leave now so she could be up in time for work in the morning. Panic breaking her out of the beautiful daydream she had found herself ensconced in for the past few hours, Joyce put her coat on and moved to make a hasty exit towards the door. Somehow, standing up from the sofa put into perspective just what she was doing. Bob had been gone half a year, if that, and Jim...no, Hopper was her friend, someone she needed in her life, someone she couldn't afford to lose through a romantic affair gone wrong. God, he made her feel alive just looking at her the way he was right now, but she couldn't risk losing him. She didn't know if she would survive without him – previous history showed it would probably end poorly if she tried to.

"Joyce, there's no point driving home now," Hopper said in an even-tone, well-versed in Joyce's propensity to run away like a startled rabbit at any sign of change. He knew she was trying to cultivate a routine, to try and jumpstart normality, but he for one knew that faking it until you made it worked 100% in theory, and 0% in reality.

When she had almost broken his door down earlier, he had been thinking of Sara, how unfair it was that a world this godless could exist, where his little girl could be ripped away from him with no explanation, no good reason whatsoever. Had been thinking that maybe his purpose in life was to be a sign to others to be grateful for

what they had, to be a lesson to cherish your loved ones, because *hey look at Chief Jim Hopper, he doesn't have anyone.*

But whilst it may have been true once, he had let that thought sink so deep into his psyche that it was difficult to scoop out. And it just didn't fit anymore. He wasn't alone – he had a daughter, someone who needed him around to teach her why the world *wasn't* such a bad place. Because whilst what he had experienced of it was pretty shit, Eleven had seen worse. She had seen the very bare bones of humanity, and the evil contained within. It was his job to make sure she never had to see that naked truth ever again.

And then he had the Byers.

And he was now pretty sure that he had Joyce. Joyce who he had wanted for half of his life.

“Well where am I going to sleep Hop? I can't make you sleep on the sofa in your own house,” Joyce protested, and Jim gave her a look that made her doubt her own sanity. He moved across the small living room with a swiftness that surprised her, and before she could *scream put me down*, Hop swung her over his shoulder and carried her towards his room.

She half-heartedly hit him on the back, but her laughter killed any credibility she might have had left within her. Joyce had her doubts – she doubted everything, always had, always would, it was her defence mechanism – but they were gradually sliding away with every minute she spent in Hopper's company tonight.

He deposited her gently onto the middle of his bed, but stopped moving in as he caught a sight of her expression.

“Is this okay Joyce?” he asked, layers of consideration and concern in his tone.

Joyce pulled herself into a sitting position, and began unbuttoning her coat, throwing it nonchalantly off the side of Jim's bed. A picture of Sara on his bedside cabinet stopped her in her tracks, and she repeated Hopper's question back to him.

They contemplated one another for a moment, both knowing how easy it would be for Joyce to put on her coat again, go home, and act like this evening had never happened. It already seemed like an alien occurrence, like something that had happened outside of the normal timeline, so why couldn't they pretend some more? It wasn't like either of them was lacking in practice or experience acting like certain things had never happened.

But he didn't want that. And he knew Joyce Byers well enough to know she didn't want that either.

Hopper reached down and pulled his shirt off over his head, and leaned down to kiss Joyce. She pressed her head back into the soft pillows on his bed, just taking him in, allowing herself permission, and forgiving herself in advance. She was pliant against him, wanting him to give her everything he could, and letting him know she was a willing receiver.

He pulled her pyjama shirt off and carelessly threw it on top of her coat. His fingertips glided across her plain nude bra before he unclasped it at the back, disposing of another article of the clothing separating them. Joyce avoided eye contact with him, and Hopper grasped her chin in his hand and murmured, "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," his pupils blown, his eyes wide with desire for her.

The sound of their ragged breathing filled the small room, and at that moment, Joyce let go of every inhibition in her body. She launched herself towards Hopper, kissing him without technique but with enthusiasm and lust and sheer *hunger*. And it seemed he was starving too. They kissed ravenously, lips sliding against one another, teeth clacking as they strained to get closer and closer and closer. His large hands covered her breasts, and he thumbed her nipples, whilst she raked a hand down his back.

Hopper moved his lips from her mouth to her neck and couldn't resist the urge to bite down. Joyce let out a cry so ecstatic that it took him an enormous amount of effort to calm down, and he slathered kisses along her neck, her collarbone, and sucked at the base of her throat.

"Jim...Jim," Joyce moaned loudly, and something primal within him

forced him to move on from his ministrations above. He covered her left breast with his mouth, feeling the heat emanating from her body, and slipped a hand into her pants and inside her underwear.

Joyce managed to force out the words, "Hop, get these damn things off me...right now," before she abandoned words in favour of trying to control herself. With the smile of a child on Christmas morning, Jim retracted his hand for a moment, and pulled down Joyce's pyjama pants, and her underwear along with them. Noting his complete distraction, Joyce reclaimed her autonomy for a second and undid Hopper's jeans, getting them halfway down his thighs before he realised and helped.

They barely had a second to register their complete state of undress before Hopper swung one of Joyce's legs over his shoulder and swooped in.

Joyce was glad they were in the middle of the woods, because even from her house on the outskirts of town, half the residents would've heard her exclamation. God, God, she couldn't think...his mouth, his tongue moved with a dexterity that she didn't believe was possible, and Joyce scrunched the bottom sheet in her fists, curled her toes into the mattress. Encouraged by the gasps and groans, Jim started to move a little faster against her, digging his fingers into her leg as he dove deeper. He could feel her whole body trembling, and it was *damn good*. She tasted different from how he remembered her, but somehow better. Joyce was a goddamn fucking miracle.

"Hop...Jim, God," Joyce exclaimed, "Hop..." She tugged at her hair as he sucked, and with a loud cry, came so hard she saw white. She could feel the reverberations of Jim's chuckles against her inner thigh, and so grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him up to meet her.

She kissed him with fervour and desperation and adoration, and he clutched at every piece of skin he could reach. She was perfect, perfect, perfect, perfect...

And more aggressive than he remembered.

He laughed in surprise as she somehow flipped them so he was on his

back, but soon found his laughter replaced by a gasp of pleasure as she lowered herself onto him, taking in all of him in one fell swoop.

“C-condom,” Jim stuttered as Joyce slowly began to move on top of him, and she shook her head. “After Will, they said...no more kids,” Joyce managed to enunciate, and Hopper let loose what he had been holding back until he had that confirmation.

He gripped her waist and the tops of her legs so hard he was surprised she didn’t bleed, and thrust upwards into her, more and more aroused every time he realised just how wet she was for him. Above him, her face was an image he wanted to engrave onto his eyelids so he could see it every time he closed his eyes. She moved with rhythm and pace, meeting his thrusts every time, groaning as he moved a hand to stroke against her.

And whilst Joyce was so distracted, Jim took the opportunity to flip her onto her back once again.

“Hop that is cheating,” she murmured as he started to thrust faster and faster into her, forcing her to cling onto him for dear life.

“Did I ever claim to not play dirty?” Jim whispered into her ear before kissing her. Neither of them lasted much longer after that.

He remained inside of her after they finished, unwilling to part from the warmth she was providing, but even more unwilling to be so apart from her again. He withdrew only after she laughed and slapped his arm and told him he was crushing her; she clambered on top of him once he had done so, and tucked her head into the alcove between his shoulder and his chin.

They would’ve talked, but neither of them really had anything to say. They had spent years talking. So he embraced her completely, holding onto her like he was afraid she would slip through his fingers, and she stroked his hair, tucked her leg between his, and dreamt that they were seventeen again, hidden in her parents’ attic, with everything still to come.

Author's Note:

Hope you guys enjoyed!! It got away from me a little bit.

Pls let me know if you spot any errors, I'm a fiend for not checking my work properly!